

In the beginning, there were six Regional Forestry Commissions

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FAO's regional fora provide excellent opportunities for countries to work together to find common solutions to forest issues.

Early in the history of FAO, countries recognized the importance of building international cooperation in forestry from the ground up. At the second Conference of FAO in 1946, countries were invited to establish national subcommittees on forestry. At the third Conference the following year, the first Regional Forestry Commission was established in Europe. By 1961, each major geographical region of the world had its own forestry commission.

By the time of the first meeting of the FAO Committee on Forestry (COFO) in 1972, 50 Regional Forestry Commission meetings had already been held. By the end of 2004, the regional commissions will have met 127 times (see Table), compared with 16 meetings of COFO and a combined 12 meetings of the Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF), the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF) and the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF). The simple fact is that more “international dialogue on forests” historically has taken place at the regional level than at the global level.

Each Regional Forestry Commission is a neutral forum where countries come together on a regular basis, usually every two years, to discuss policy issues that affect the region, to exchange information about forests and to work together to address problems that do not recognize

national boundaries. These discussions help translate global commitments into action in the regions. Conversely, the recommendations from the Regional Commissions obtain global attention at COFO and other fora such as UNFF.

The commissions advise FAO on policy formulation and on priorities for its forestry programme; their recommendations are reviewed by the Committee on Forestry (COFO) in its biennial sessions at FAO headquarters in Rome. COFO, in turn, reports to the Council of FAO. In this way the commissions bring forth regional issues that require global attention. Similarly, COFO provides recommendations to the regional commissions – in this way giving guidance from the global level to the regional level.

At the same time, each region is different. The diversity in the approaches taken by the six commissions reflects the diversity of the regions in terms of the economic, environmental and social dimensions of forests. In 1949, the Conference of FAO decided “that the work of the regional commissions should be adjusted to the needs of each region, and the Conference has decided not to lay down formal terms of reference, in order to give the commissions flexibility” (FAO, 1949a).

This article summarizes some distinguishing features and accomplishments of each of the six Regional Forestry

Regional Forestry Commissions – facts and figures (as of October 2004)

Commission	Date of first meeting	Number of members	Number of sessions
European Forestry Commission	1948	34	32
Latin American and Caribbean Forestry Commission	1949	32	23
Asia-Pacific Forestry Commission	1950	30	20
Near East Forestry Commission	1955	24	16
African Forestry and Wildlife Commission	1960	45	14
North American Forest Commission	1961	3	22
Total		168	127

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Commissions and envisages their future role.

EUROPEAN FORESTRY COMMISSION

The European Forestry Commission (EFC) was established by resolution of the third session of the Conference of FAO in 1947, which emphasized the importance of cooperation between FAO and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. The first session of EFC was held in Geneva in July 1948. Over the years, EFC has met 11 times in Geneva, 14 times in Rome and only seven times in other locations. Alternate sessions (every four years) are held as joint sessions with the UNECE Timber Committee, further stressing the importance of the long-term partnership in the forest sector between FAO and UNECE.

In the early years, the focus of both EFC and the Timber Committee was on ensuring a sustainable supply of timber in Europe following the Second World War. The first meeting of EFC debated basic standards for collecting data on forest resources and forest products in the region. Early meeting reports included references to fears of a shortage of wood-based products needed to support an expanding European population. The emphasis on improving information quality and monitoring the big picture has been maintained throughout EFC's history. Other central activities have been forest resources assessment and long-term forest-sector outlook studies, both of which have alerted specialists and the policy community to emerging issues. EFC has always been flexible enough to address the major issues of the day, unforeseen events such as major storms, and the impact of developments in other fields such as energy or environmental policy.

Gradually over the years EFC has broadened its range of issues, increasingly emphasizing a balanced approach to the social, economic and environmental aspects of forests. For example, the agenda of the joint meeting of EFC and the UNECE Timber Committee in October 2004 addressed the following issues:

- the future role of EFC and the Timber Committee in the international forest policy dialogue;
- forest law enforcement and governance;
- regional agreements for mutual assistance on forest fires;
- long-term challenges for forest and timber policies and institutions in a wider Europe.

These agenda items reflect the response of Regional Forestry Commissions to shifting concerns in the sector. For example, an examination of the role of EFC and the Timber Committee in the wider international policy dialogue is timely because countries will be debating these issues at the next meeting of UNFF. Law enforcement and regional cooperation on forest fires are issues

of current interest to many countries. The expansion of the European Union to include ten new countries presents challenges in the forest sector as well as in other sectors.

The European Forestry Commission has utilized a variety of mechanisms for implementing its decisions, including formal working groups such as the European Working Group on Mountain Watersheds and teams of specialists on specific subjects such as forest products markets and marketing; forest resources monitoring; forest fire; gender and forestry; best practices in forest contracting; and sustainable forest sector development in the Commonwealth of Independent States and southeastern Europe.

EFC stresses partnerships with other organizations (e.g. the European Union and the International Labour Organization) and with stakeholders. A strong partnership is with the Ministerial Con-

Among the mechanisms used to implement the decisions of the European Forestry Commission are working groups on specific topics, such as mountain watersheds



ference for the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE), which is the highest policy-level forum on forestry in Europe. Cooperation with MCPFE has strengthened the impact of many EFC activities, and EFC has provided essential support to many MCPFE activities, notably as regards criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management.

LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN FORESTRY COMMISSION

The Latin American Commission for Forestry and Forest Products was established by the fourth session of the Conference of FAO in 1948. The first meeting, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1949, was attended by seven countries from South America and one from Central America. The commission later expanded to include Caribbean countries, and the Latin American and Caribbean Forestry Commission (LACFC) currently has 32 members.

The first 55 years of this commission have witnessed many changes in the forest sector in the region. Many countries have developed sophisticated forestry institutions, including advanced universities and forest research centres. The private sector has boomed in some countries and remains relatively undeveloped in others. Cooperation among countries has increased, as witnessed by a number of active networks at the regional or subregional levels in areas such as forest fires and national forest programmes. LACFC is the coordinating mechanism for two regional technical cooperation networks: one on national parks, other protected areas and wildlife, and another on watershed management.

Examples of recent accomplishments include:

- development of regional networks to prevent and combat forest fires;
- cooperation on forests and climate change;

- sharing of technology for forest information systems and forest assessments;
- development of common approaches to address forest and water issues.

In recent years, a steering committee of LACFC has become increasingly active. It comprises vice-presidents from

each of four subregional groups: the Southern Cone countries; Amazon countries; meso-America; and the Caribbean. Countries within the subregional groups are meeting on an increasingly frequent basis, in some cases at the ministerial level, to address common concerns (see Box below). One outcome of such col-

Targeting shared issues: groupings of the Caribbean Subgroup

Regional groupings still embrace great diversity, and at times further subdivisions facilitate the targeting of shared problems. The Caribbean Subgroup of the Latin American and Caribbean Forestry Commission embraces all the Caribbean islands and three continental countries (Belize, Guyana and Suriname) plus dependent territories of the United States, the United Kingdom and France. The average population density in the islands (155 persons per square kilometre) is six times higher than in the continental countries of Latin America (24 persons per square kilometre). The 16 countries of the subgroup represent only 4 percent of the total forest cover and 7 percent of the total population of the Latin American continent.

Yet this subgroup is still very diverse: it includes countries with extensive forest cover (Guyana and Suriname) and countries with very little forest such as Haiti and Antigua and Barbuda; it includes countries with very low average population density such as Suriname and Guyana (4 persons per square kilometre) and densely populated countries such as Barbados (626 persons per square kilometre).

Accordingly, the subgroup realizes most of its activities in smaller working groups which focus cooperation better by concentrating it among countries with similar ecological and social conditions. For example, in 2004 the Ad hoc Working Group of Countries with Large Extensions of Forests (Belize,

Guyana, French Guyana, Suriname) held a regional meeting on reduced impact logging. The working group of small- and medium-sized English-speaking islands (Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados) held a regional workshop on forest management for ecotourism and a regional expert consultation on environmental education. A third working group targets issues of French- and Spanish-speaking islands (Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic).

Participation in the groups is not exclusive; countries from any subregional grouping are free to participate in workshops and meetings of the other working groups.

Source: Extracted from a report prepared by James Singh, Forest Commissioner of Guyana and Vice-President for the Caribbean Subgroup of the Latin American and Caribbean Forestry Commission.



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laboration, for example, is the forestry strategy formulated by the Central American Commission for Environment and Development (CCAD) under the umbrella of LACFC.

ASIA-PACIFIC FORESTRY COMMISSION

The Asia-Pacific Forestry Commission (APFC) was formed as a result of the Forestry and Timber Utilization Conference for Asia and the Pacific convened by the Conference of FAO in Mysore, India in 1949. As in Europe, there was concern in Asia about maintaining a sustainable supply of wood, as well as concern about high rates of deforestation in several countries in the region in the years immediately after the Second World War. The Mysore conference

concluded that, in spite of “economic and political tensions and difficulties now so widespread in the region, governments were urged to make plans for forest development, expansion and conservation” (FAO, 1949b).

From its earliest sessions, APFC recognized the wide range of differences in conditions among countries in the region. In some areas forests were plentiful and in other areas they were scarce. In many countries, population pressure and poverty were leading to widespread deforestation.

APFC has met 20 times and currently has 30 members. It brings together the diversity of developed and poor countries in the region in a single forum. Through the establishment of technical working groups, the commission has

Through technical working groups, the Asia-Pacific Forestry Commission has developed practical tools such as the Code of practice for forest harvesting in Asia-Pacific, now being implemented on a country-by-country basis

been able to develop practical solutions to priority problems; an example is the *Code of practice for forest harvesting in Asia-Pacific*, developed by the commission at the regional level and now being implemented on a country-by-country basis.

Recent accomplishments of APFC include:

- pioneering country involvement in the preparation of regional forestry sector outlook studies;
- regional studies on the impact of logging bans;
- regional reviews of the effectiveness of incentives for stimulating plantation development;
- the launching of the Asia-Pacific Forest Invasive Species Network;
- the initiative “In Search of Excellence” to identify cases of exemplary forest management in the region.

In recent years, an APFC Executive Committee, comprising the Chair and Vice-Chairs of APFC, has been estab-

lished to provide a mechanism for more action between the biennial meetings of the commission. Perhaps the most important change in approach is that APFC is taking direct responsibility for overseeing more and more of FAO's work in the region, where previously practical decisions were usually taken by FAO staff in the FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok.

NEAR EAST FORESTRY COMMISSION

In an anecdote about the founding of FAO, it has been said that President Franklin Roosevelt of the United States was shocked, when he flew over the area of the Near East where the cedars of Lebanon had once stood, to witness the results of deforestation and misuse. When he returned to Washington, he insisted that forestry should be included as a priority in the mandate of the new Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. While it cannot be verified if this is a true story or folklore, it provides an interesting perspective from which to discuss forestry in the Near East region.

The Near East region is dominated by low-forest-cover countries; the Sudan and Turkey are the only countries in the region with more than 10 percent forest cover. However, this does not mean that forestry is unimportant in the region; on the contrary, the relative scarcity of forests places an even greater importance on the forests and trees outside forests that are found in the region.

The Near East Forestry Commission (NEFC) was first convened in 1952 by the Conference of FAO. Since the Near East is not a distinct geographical region, a number of the NEFC members are also members of other commissions, including those for Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Europe. Nonetheless, NEFC has become an increasingly vibrant venue for countries that share common environmental and cultural situations to discuss policy issues and to share information and technology.

Since its founding, NEFC has grown from 8 to 24 regional members. During its 52 years, major accomplishments have included:

- promotion of afforestation and tree planting for protective purposes;

- integration of forest trees in landscapes and in agricultural and urban settings in arid zones (shelterbelts, windbreaks, sand dune fixation, amenity trees);
- promotion of both indigenous and exotic fast-growing tree species throughout the region.

NEFC has also provided support to forestry education and public awareness of the benefits of trees and forests. Achievements include the establishment of a regional forestry and range school; development of forestry terminology in Arabic and translation of forestry literature; inclusion of forestry in the curricula of agriculture schools; and the inclusion of broader multidisciplinary curricula in many schools, addressing issues such as rural economics, land management and the vital role of forests and trees in food production and food security.

In recent years, NEFC has supported the Tehran Process for support to low-forest-cover countries (LFCCs) and the development and implementation of criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management in LFCCs.



Major accomplishments of the Near East Forestry Commission have included promotion of afforestation and tree planting in arid zones

AFRICAN FORESTRY AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION

The first session of the African Forestry and Wildlife Commission (AFWC), then known as the African Forestry Commission, was held in Nigeria in 1960, attended by representatives of 18 African countries and four European countries. As of 2004, 44 African countries have joined the commission. Seven AFWC members also belong to the Near East Forestry Commission, and five belong to the AFWC/EFC/NEFC Committee on Mediterranean Forestry Questions – *Silva Mediterranea*, another FAO statutory body. AFWC has a very active subsidiary body, the Working Party on the Management of Wildlife and Protected Areas.

For many years, AFWC, like some of the others in the early years, was not very active. Because of the development problems that affect all countries in the region, AFWC lacked the resources or institutional support to do much more than host biennial meetings to discuss issues of interest to countries in the region. However, in the past five to six years, the commission has been revitalized in its role as a forum for addressing highly relevant forest policy issues. Interest in regional approaches to solving problems is rapidly increasing, and a number of subregional initiatives such as the Conference of Ministers for the Forests of Central Africa (COMIFAC) process in Central Africa have helped to strengthen regional processes as well.

Recent accomplishments of AFWC include:

- the Forestry Outlook Study for Africa (FOSA), a comprehensive and highly participatory region-wide process;
- promotion of subregional initiatives, for example the development of a bushmeat strategy for western Africa;
- support to countries for imple-

menting policies agreed at the regional level;

- preparation of position papers and related institutional support for African participation in the international forest dialogue.

Despite these recent improvements, AFWC faces a number of obstacles that make it difficult for the commission to become as effective as it would like to be. Barriers include the high cost of travel within the region; ongoing civil unrest in many countries; high turnover of staff, especially in those countries affected most heavily by HIV/AIDS; and relatively weak forestry and wildlife institutions in many of the countries.

NORTH AMERICAN FOREST COMMISSION

The last regional commission established by the Conference of FAO, the North American Forestry Commission (NAFC), met for the first time in Mexico in 1961. (In 1997, as preferred by its members, it changed its name to the North American Forest Commission.) With only three member countries (Canada, Mexico and the United States), NAFC has less difficulty than other regions in carrying out activities in which all members participate.

Over the years, NAFC has developed an approach to cooperation based on the concept of technical working groups. Most of the working groups started as research study groups, with a focus on sharing scientific information among research institutions in the region. In recent years, the focus of most of the groups has shifted away from research and more towards cooperation on policy and management issues.

Each working group includes at least one active member from each of the three countries. Members include government officials, academic researchers, members of private companies and mem-

bers of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The current NAFC working groups deal with:

- atmospheric change and forests;
- fire management;
- forest products;
- insects and diseases;
- silviculture;
- forest genetic resources;
- forest inventory, monitoring and assessment;
- watershed management.

Examples of cooperation among countries under the NAFC umbrella include a number of regional seminars and conferences sponsored by working groups; agreements among the countries in the region to share resources to fight forest fires and outbreaks of forest insect pests and diseases; joint studies on the effects of air pollution on forests; and development of common standards and methodologies for forest resources assessments.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

At virtually every recent Regional Forestry Commission meeting, as well as at every recent meeting of COFO (see Box on the following page), there has been a consensus among countries that the commissions should be strengthened, that their role should be expanded and that they can play an even more effective role in supporting the efforts of countries to achieve sustainable forest management.

In several regions, there is consensus support for expanding the role of the commission to become a venue for regional policy dialogue, as well as for providing direct support to the implementation of sustainable forest management in countries in the region. This would entail strengthened collaboration with other regional fora, such as APFC with the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), AFWC with the African Timber Organization (ATO) and EFC with MCPFE.

Some Committee on Forestry (COFO) recommendations regarding the Regional Forestry Commissions

COFO 1997

- The Regional Forestry Commissions (RFCs) should form subregional groups to address specific issues, to establish networks and to exchange information.
- The FAO Forestry Department should provide the RFCs with strategic direction.
- RFCs should be open and involve representatives of NGOs and the private sector in their meetings.

COFO 1999

- FAO should prioritize the recommendations of RFCs in line with the *Strategic Framework for FAO 2000–2015*.
- FAO and countries should continue their efforts to strengthen RFCs.

COFO 2001

- FAO should continue to strengthen the capacity and roles of RFCs.
- RFCs should support implementation of the IPF/IFF proposals for action by facilitating national review and prioritization of the proposals, and by identifying the comparative advantages of organizations and processes in the region.
- RFCs could take an active role in facilitating the input of regional perspectives to the UNFF and CPF.
- RFCs should enhance the involvement of the private sector and NGOs in forestry.

COFO 2003

- RFCs are an important mechanism to support member countries in implementing sustainable forest management.
- RFCs should strengthen their links with other regional organizations and processes.
- FAO, through RFCs, should take the lead in providing support and increasing focus on policy and technical advice to countries on implementing IPF/IFF proposals for action and continue its efforts to build capacity in member countries in this area.
- RFCs should facilitate the assessment and implementation of IPF/IFF proposals for action and other internationally agreed actions in the countries.
- RFCs should facilitate the flow of information between UNFF and countries.
- FAO, through the RFCs, should increase awareness of the importance of sustainable forest management in countries.

The potential role of the regional forestry commissions as a mechanism for focusing regional inputs to global processes such as UNFF could also be strengthened, for example through side meetings.

In addition, there might be scope for more collaboration among the regional commissions and their working groups. Such collaboration is encouraged but at present mainly theoretical. Several countries participate in more than one commission (for example, North African countries in AFWC and NEFC, and the United States and Mexico in NAFC and LACFC), providing some cross-pollination of ideas among the commissions. The clearest and most fruitful example of collaboration among commissions in recent years was the Pan-American Conference on Wildland Fire, jointly sponsored by LACFC and NAFC in Costa Rica in October 2004.

As with most initiatives in the public sector in the modern era, ambitions exceed the financial resources available to achieve them. The biggest single challenge to the Regional Forestry Commissions may be to have more of an impact without significant resources. The commissions have no operating budget as such; FAO funding is limited to organizing and servicing the biennial meetings. Beyond that, it is up to the member countries to support the commissions.

Ultimately, the impact of the Regional Forestry Commissions is determined by their members. The extent to which the commissions can become more effective in the future will depend in large part on the commitments made by countries within each region. FAO will continue to provide secretarial support to the commissions, but their effectiveness relies on country support, whether financial or in kind. Regardless of their magnitude, country contributions indicate a true sense of ownership of the commission.

CONCLUSIONS

The Regional Forestry Commissions have a long history, in most cases at least 50 years. More than any single institution, the commissions have served as a venue for more people from different countries to work together to find common solutions to forest issues.

It is hard to measure the impact of the Regional Forestry Commissions. Like other fora that bring people together to exchange ideas and aspirations, the commissions do not usually produce tangible outputs along the lines of tree planting or establishing forestry schools. But this does not mean that the Regional Forestry Commissions have not had an important impact on the world of forestry. How does one measure the value of networking, of information sharing, of synergies from joint problem-solving?

The recommendations of the Regional Forestry Commissions tend to be more specific and practical than the recommendations of COFO, which addresses the global level. This is because countries in a given region tend to have more in common and tend to be more willing to commit to take action on regional issues than might be the case at the global level.

The commissions also have weaknesses. Most importantly, they have no operating budget. Their constituent members may or may not have resources to implement their recommendations. The recommendations of the commissions in the more affluent regions therefore have a higher likelihood of being enacted than do the recommendations of the commissions in the poorer regions. As with any intergovernmental forum, participation in the Regional Forestry Commissions is voluntary and recommendations are not legally binding.

The great challenge for the future is to overcome these limitations through an increase in voluntary participation

and commitments by the member countries.

On balance, most people who have participated in the Regional Forestry Commissions over the years are supporters of the process. Most countries are convinced that the benefits exceed the costs. As the global forest community debates options for international arrangements, there are good reasons to give thoughtful consideration to the potential role of Regional Forestry Commissions in advancing cooperation and action towards sustainable forest management around the world. ♦



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